

Charles Peek's RAF history

Christchurch, Dorset businessman Charles Peek had a distinguished service career in the Royal Air Force between 1940 and 1950. Here is his own description of his service career

Left Malvern College in the summer term of 1940. Was a senior member of the Officers Training Unit. There was no ATC at that time. I wore an RAF armband and went to Air Force station Little Rislington, for training.

November, 1940. Joined up RAF from RAFVR (Voluntary Reserve), Babbacombe, Torquay.

January, 1941. Boxed for RAF against Army and Navy.

February, 1941. Joined Troop Ship at Greenock, Glasgow. All kitted out for training in South Africa but instead of sailing south, we sailed north and anchored off Newfoundland. 20 of us on board climbed down rope ladders off Troop Ship and taken on board Destroyer. Troop Ship proceeded to South Africa; Destroyer crossed North Atlantic to Canada. Whilst on board, we served as naval ratings in the CPO's Mess.

Once in Canada, great fuss made of us. We were put on a train and travelled across the country, a journey of 3-4 days. Each time we stopped for re-fuelling a party of girls would welcome us at the station. Eventually arrived in Winnipeg. We were the first English servicemen to go to Canada for training.

Did not know at the time but we had been specially chosen to train as "Observers", i.e. training in navigation, bombing, wireless, gunnery and, finally, advanced astral navigation. Course started March 1941 and finished August, 1941.

We did not know either that England had arranged with America to make the Hudson aircraft. These planes were Manufactured in U.S.A. but as America was not then in the War they were taken at night by horses over the border into Canada; Canadians then delivered them to an Aerodrome.

In Montreal, the Canadians formed a Ferry Command, which embraced all the pre-War National pilots. They could fly, but could not navigate, and the idea was that the pilots would fly the planes and the Observers would navigate the North Atlantic. Each aircraft was fitted with a large rubber bag, carried in the fuselage; this was filled with aviation gasoline, the tanks of the Hudson being too small to carry all the fuel required for the 2,000 mile flight across the North Atlantic. On each flight there was a Wireless Operator but we flew in silence until we could see the coast of England. The Wireless Operator would then make contact with Prestwick Air Force Station, at which we would land.

I flew with Captain Jim Broadbent, who had just won the Schneider Trophy- a very well-known man.

On 4.9.41 I had my 20th Birthday.

14th to 15th September, 1941. Test flights across Canada.

17th September, 1941. Flew Hudson AE565 from Dorval, Canada, to Gander, Nova Scotia.

20th September, 1941. Flew same aircraft from Gander, Nova Scotia, across the North Atlantic to Prestwick in England (*Scotland actually*). A flight of 11 hours 46 minutes.

Have since found out that this aircraft was the 97th Hudson to make the crossing. Was then sent on leave and afterwards went to Pershore, where we were crewed up to fly Wellingtons.

20th December, 1941. Flew to Gibraltar.

22nd December, 1941. Flew to Malta.

Christmas Day, 1941. Flew to North Africa, where I joined 37 Squadron for operations.

Did 15 bombing operations and on 10th August, 1942, was flown by the Americans, in a Flying Fortress, from Egypt to Kana, Nigeria. Nigeria to Accra, Gold Coast, on to a Firestone Plantation in Liberia. From Liberia to Natal in Brazil, then to Trinidad; on to Miami, and Palm Beach, to Washington and, finally, Montreal. A 5 day trip. Rank now Flight Sergeant.

Then had leave in New York; met the President and his cousin: discussed bombing operations, Middle East. At this time, America had joined the war, following Pearl Harbour (Sunday, 7th December, 1941).

September, 1942. Posted to the "QUEEN MARY" in New York and helped load her with American troops. Was in charge of one deck for meal orders. "QUEEN MARY" came over to Liverpool and I had leave with my Parents.

Whilst on board the "QUEEN MARY," I had - 21st Birthday - 4.9.42.

October, 1942. Posted to Whitchurch, Shropshire. Commissioned Pilot Officer.

October, 1942. Bombing Leaders' Course. at Mamby. Finished special Mark 14 high level American bomb site course as an Instructor to teach Instructors.

January, 1943 - promoted to Flying Officer.

February, 1943 - Bombing Instructor, RAF Castle Donnington.

July, 1943 - No.1 Lancaster conversion course, Hemswell. Promoted to Flight Lieutenant.

550 Squadron formed out "C" flight 100 Squadron at Waltham, Grimsby, and moved to North Killingholm in January, 1944.

I joined the Squadron as its Bombing Leader in June, 1944, and served to the end of the War when the squadron was disbanded in October, 1945, having completed 44 night and day bombing operations.

There were 3 Flight Commanders, Squadron Leaders, and 7 Leaders of the other crew members, I being their Bombing Leader: We were all Flight Lieutenants.

Loss rate was 1 in 3 so, as Leaders, we were not allowed to fly more than once a month. The crews flew daily. I had 38 Lancasters for operations. The Squadron, in a year, lost approximately 350 aircrew.

April, 1945. Did operations over Holland, to The Hague and Rotterdam, dropping food for the Dutch who were starving. This carried out at 1000ft low level - all daylight trips.

July, 1945. Did several flights to Italy, bringing back the Army- mostly to Naples.

After the War, during 1950/51/52, I was in the Royal Air Force Reserve and flew out of Hamble.